

You Need to Understand Lobbying By Lee Hamilton

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When news stories about questionable doings on Capitol Hill appear these days, more often than not they involve lobbyists. Think of the Jack Abramoff affair and its many spinoffs, or the ruckus over the New York Times story about John McCain and his dealings with one particular lobbyist. Small wonder that many Americans continue to think of lobbyists as little more than back-room influence peddlers.

The truth, though, is rather different. Most lobbyists are hard-working professionals who understand how to navigate the political process, gain access to lawmakers and key executive-branch officials, and build a strategy to achieve their legislative goals. Whether or not you like the prominent place they occupy in our system, lobbyists have become such an integral part of how our government operates that you can't really understand Washington unless you also understand the role they play in it.

Let's start with the basics. Lobbying is a huge business. There are roughly 30,000 registered lobbyists, but that does not include the marketers, public relations experts, pollsters, support personnel and others who back up their work. One lobbying expert, American University government professor James Thurber, puts the total number of people involved in lobbying at 261,000.

This army of people — whose activities, remember, are aimed at influencing just 535 members of Congress and a relative handful of federal officials — cost and spend several billion dollars each year. At least one company spent more than \$1 billion in lobbying activities last year, at the federal and state levels.

A good lobbyist can make four or five times what a legislator or high-ranking official earns, and there's a reason for this. Groups with interests in Washington pay big money for the lobbyists they hire because if they're successful, the payoffs can be huge: subsidies for business; tax breaks for corporations and industries; immunity from lawsuits or even from laws their competitors must obey.

Regardless of which party controls the White House or Capitol Hill, it has become clear to pretty much every interest imaginable in recent years that Washington can stack the deck in its favor or tilt the field against it, and the lobbying workload has soared as a result. In a very real sense, lobbyists have become intermediaries between Washington and the organizations that represent the vast diversity of people, beliefs, and interests in our society.

Even without the occasional scandal, Americans tend to be skeptical about this development. They see lobbyists as agents of special interests who get privileged access to decision-makers, in part by buying it through campaign contributions. There's truth to this. Many Washington lobbyists are active in raising money and support for candidates who back their positions; they make hard-headed judgments about who will most strongly support their industries or causes and hence get their cash. And lobbyists undoubtedly get the chance to press their cases on Capitol Hill with access that your average farmer or teacher can only envy.

Yet the reality is more complicated than “special interests” overwhelming “the public interest.” Lobbyists deal in facts — the best of them know that what lawmakers want is straightforward, understandable, and accurate information on a given issue. So on any tough policy matter, which will inevitably find Americans coming down on every side of the issue, all the various interests will be armed with good arguments that make the strongest possible case for their position. While it's too simplistic to say that they cancel one another out, this does mean that they serve an invaluable purpose in helping members of Congress understand an issue and, perhaps even more important, to understand how various constituencies view it.

This suggests a responsibility on the part of public officials who are being lobbied. It is their job not simply to be passive recipients of arguments and information, but to sort through it, and in particular to understand that it comes with a point of view — to listen carefully, in other words, but also remember that a lobbyist presents only one side of a complex issue. The skillful lobbyist, of course, will identify his or her position with the broader public good, but an equally skillful politician understands how to separate the wheat from the rhetorical chaff.

At the same time, ordinary voters should remember that they have one attribute that a member of Congress prizes highly: a vote. For all the campaign contributions they hand out and access they enjoy, lobbyists don't actually have the final say on whether a member of Congress gets re-elected; that's up to the folks back home. Which is why transparency — strict reporting laws on campaign contributions and lobbying expenditures, with easy access to that information for reporters and ordinary Americans — is so important.

For in the end, the voters have to judge whether a member of Congress has allowed lobbyists' arguments and contributions to outweigh the interests of his or her constituents and of the public at large. If so, that's what the voting booth is for.

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